

Under the Skin

Colour and Production Design in *The Brides of Dracula* (1960)

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ABSTRACT

The Brides of Dracula (1960) follows English studio Hammer Films' penchant for exploitative violence and sexuality. But through its colour palette, the film also uses common horror conventions to "exploit the spectacle of heterosexual romance," encouraging "queer positioning" (Doty 83). Though red is foreboding in this film, it is as familiar as it is in most other vampire texts, luring audiences into a false sense of expectation. Red-clad protagonists clash with unsuspected blue atmospheres of each vampiric confrontation, resulting in purples that code characters as existing within the centre of the sexuality spectrum between red and blue. Through the interrelation of the colours red, blue and purple, in costume, props, scenery, and blood, *Brides* specifically explores its characters' sexualities, deviancy, and madness.

HAMMER FILMS' *The Brides of Dracula* (1960) follows the UK studio's tradition of exploiting violence and sexuality. This film is, however, the first of the series and from the studio to use its rich colour palette to specifically explore sexuality, deviancy, and madness. Through its mise-en-scène, *The Brides of Dracula* uses the recurring colours red, blue, and purple to convey and correspond to each character's varying degrees of sexuality and madness.

Each major colour in *Brides'* palette represents a sexual orientation akin to the Kinsey scale, between red (0, "exclusively heterosexual") and blue (6, "exclusively homosexual"), marking purple as the implied measure of bisexuality (3, "equally heterosexual and homosexual") (n.p.). Beginning with red, the colour of choice for vampire texts and its clichés since the advent of colourized film, its clashes with *Brides'* occurrences of blue are what characterize the film's unique perspective on sexuality and vampirism. When looking through the metaphorical lens of blood, there emerges a pattern in which these colours appear to lead into each "purple," queer reveal. When removed from the body, blood which was previously intravenous and blue now appears red. Though red is foreboding in this film, it is clear and familiar, "outside of its skin," luring audiences into a false sense of expectation as Baroness Meinster (Martita Hunt) does when she lures the red-clad, straight-coded Marianne (Yvonne Monlaur) to Castle Meinster to feed her vampiric son, the Baron (David Peel) (Figs. 1 and 2).



Fig. 1 & 2 | Baroness Meinster and Marianne in *The Brides of Dracula*, 00:08:44; 00:16:57. Hammer Films, 1960.

Even then, we see a glowing blue surrounding the Baroness (Fig. 1), which is ubiquitous throughout the film. Notably, blue serves the important thematic and atmospheric purpose of signifying when protagonists are about to be tested and when the Meinsters are about to let themselves be seen for who they truly are intravenously or “underneath their skin.” The film signifies the result of these encounters, vampiric and sexual, with purple: a narrative and venereal clash between red and blue. As Fletcher observes, when removed from the veins, still pooling underneath the skin, the resulting physical trauma of blood appears purple, with highlights of blue *and* red when fresh for example, in bruises (n.p).

Purple as a combination of red and blue has a two-fold purpose in *Brides*: one, the red-clad protagonists clash with the blue foreboding atmosphere of each vampiric confrontation, creating the “trauma” necessary for purple “bruising.” Two, this clashing results in a purple that codes characters that exist on the centre of the film’s Kinsey-inspired sexuality spectrum. The Baron, the Baroness, and vampire bride Gina (Andrée Melly) are all characters dressed in key purple costume pieces while having active or past heterosexual relationships/urges *as well as* active queer relationships/urges. For instance, Gina’s transformation into a vampire emerging from a purple-lined coffin reveals her desires for both Marianne and the Baron, clashing with Marianne’s straight sensibilities as she whispers sweetly, “Let me kiss you [...] We can both love him, my darling” (Fig. 3). When *Brides* envelopes their characters in purple, it is to reveal their sexually queer nature, previously hidden “under the skin.”

Peter Cushing reprises his role as Dr. Van Helsing, the straight-acting hero written for the purpose of representing the first important colour of *Brides*’ palette: red. When Van Helsing first investigates Castle Meinster, the only colour highlighted in the dark castle is red, present in the furniture and curtains. It is only when Van Helsing opens a secret door in the wall that we see a glowing blue light emanating from a secret room (Fig. 4).

Suddenly, Van Helsing finds himself surrounded by the Baron and the Baroness. The Meinsters are filmed in wide shots, placed firmly within the centre of their colour palette. The Baron enters the room between a red ornate chair and a table bathed in the blue moonlight as he spreads his lavender silk cape that dominates centre frame; his true nature is revealed (Fig. 5).

When we see the Baroness, she is similarly in a lavish lavender sleeping gown, also standing between blue moonlight and red furnishings (Fig. 6). Film critic Richard Dyer writes that queer or sexually deviant film characters are often coded within their text as originating from of “a web of sexual sickness” within familial units, like the Baron and Baroness, whose dangerous potential lies in their ability to spread said sickness (287). The Baron, having just infected his own mother, stands proudly as he prepares to lunge at Van Helsing. The Baroness is seen hiding behind the sleeve of her gown or covering her face



Fig. 3 | Sister wives in *The Brides of Dracula*, 01:12:21. Hammer Films, 1960.



Fig. 4 | Unveiling in *The Brides of Dracula*, 00:49:28. Hammer Films, 1960.



Fig. 5 & 6 | The colours of blood and shame in *The Brides of Dracula*, 00:51:31; 00:52:39. Hammer Films, 1960.

with her hands. The Baroness is cognizant enough to express shame at her vampirism. This vampirism and the Meinster's family troubles are those which she believes are a result of her own neglect and deviancy, now draped in the bruising of purple shame. Van Helsing, however, remains immune to their influence, never spatially straying from his own red aura for too long (Fig. 7).

It is when red's provision of secure identity is no longer present to save Van Helsing that he succumbs to the Baron's vampirism.

Towards the film's climax, Van Helsing investigates the Baron's secret lair in the old town mill, a blue light appearing over his shoulder rather than in his path (Fig. 8). The scene's cinematography shows that Van Helsing is, in fact, walking into a trap set by the Baron as the camera follows him across the room, the whole of which glows with a low, soft blue (Fig. 9). Red's assurance has not been present, and will not appear to save him during his fight with the Baron.

After choking Van Helsing into submission, the Baron drapes his purple cape completely over them both as he bites the good doctor, giving them a moment of privacy from the heaving, voyeur vampire brides in the rafters. When the Baron is finished, he leaves Van Helsing splayed out on a pile of hay, covered in sweat, evidence of the sexual undertones of the fight. The resulting blood dripping down Van Helsing's



Fig. 7 | Dr. Van Helsing in *The Brides of Dracula*, 00:51:38. Hammer Films, 1960.

neck is a reference to the venerable element of the Meinster's infection (Figs. 10 and 11). Red and blue have clashed, and purple emerges.

Queer theorist Alexander Doty reminds us that horror media conventions often “exploit the spectacle of heterosexual romance,” resulting in a story that encourages “queer positioning” (83). While Hammer's *The Brides of Dracula* is consistently praised for its production value, “opulently mounted with Technicolour flashing, slickly [and] meticulously produced” (Hearn 41), it also presents this queer positioning through the conflict between the presence of red, blue, and purple within the mise-en-scène of the film. ■



Fig. 8 & 9 | Caged heat in *The Brides of Dracula*, 01:15:32; 01:16:08. Hammer Films, 1960.



Fig. 10 & 11 | Unprotected sex in *The Brides of Dracula*, 01:18:40; 01:18:50. Hammer Films, 1960.

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